

Circus and Silence

By Emi Koyama

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Campus politics sometimes imitates the real world, and that is not usually a good sign.

The problem began at a Women's Union meeting when I heard that the national anti choice organization that calls abortions in the United States a "genocide" was coming to our campus. They were planning to display large panels of gruesome pictures that supposedly show aborted fetuses, along with victims of Holocaust, racial lynching, and massacres at Wounded Knee and in Cambodia. My first thought was to get together with my friends from Lesbian Avengers and organize some sort of a protest. "Hey, we should eat fire," I said.

"Oh no, we don't want Avengers to show up," said one of the paid student staff of the Women's Union. "Don't get me wrong they are great for some occasions, but we don't want any angry people out there on this one." Their argument was that the anti choice group would eventually go away if we just ignored them. I explained that Avengers' tradition of fire eating is not about being angry, but it is a symbolic demonstration that we take in others' hatred and violence toward us and make them the source of our power. "But still, we don't want to look too angry," they insisted which I took as veiled homophobia: what they really meant was, I thought, "we don't want to look like bunch of lesbians."

"But what about students who are emotionally affected?" I asked. I proposed holding a counter rally to give people a space to vent, and making ourselves available for peer support in case any women or men for that matter are emotionally disturbed upon seeing the pictures. The co coordinators of the Women's Union quickly rejected my proposals and told me about their solution: referring students to the Counseling Center.

This "plan" seemed absurd and backward to me, because if some jerks upsets a woman by attempting to take away her constitutionally protected right to privacy, she does not need anger management or to "talk it out"; she needs to express her

righteous anger and do something about it. Would we tell a woman who is harassed on the job to remain silent and go to counseling? Of course not. Nonetheless, the coordinators ended the meeting abruptly before I could convince them that silent response was not enough. They acknowledged that there would be a meeting with other campus multicultural groups to discuss what to do in response to the anti choice demonstration, but made sure to let me know that I was not welcome there.

Dissatisfied with the Women's Union that does not advocate for women, my friends and I founded a new student organization, Feminist Conspiracy. Our plan was to cooperate with other campus and community organizations to hold a counter rally, where we could share what our reproductive freedom means to us. I introduced myself to the chairperson of the upcoming multicultural group leaders' meeting, and gained permission to attend it as the representative of the new group.

The meeting was disastrous. Women's Union requested us to wear a ribbon that supposedly stood for "supporting responsibility in free speech," which all other multicultural group leaders agreed as if that it was adequate. Nobody seemed to be concerned about how offensive the display was to women and other groups of people whose tragedies the display exploited, or how much our women students would be hurt by being forced to view the pictures.

It became quite obvious by that time that the administration had successfully lobbied multicultural student leaders to keep low key for the day they wanted absolutely no trouble on campus. In fact, their lobbying was so successful that these student leaders pledged to make the day "as non event as possible" and even signed themselves up as "neutral observers" to make sure that angry students would not attack the anti choice activists or their properties.

"Why are we acting like we are police officers here?" I asked, hoping someone would have some clue. I completely understood why the administration would want to make this a non event, but I still could not understand why student leaders had to play along. "Well, it could get out of control," said a man from the Latino group. "If Black people see those pictures on television, they would come here and riot!" A white woman from the Women's Union continued, "we are just afraid of students' safety if these people show up," suggesting that the presence of Black people on this whitewashed urban campus is somehow too dangerous. Shocked, I pointed out how

racist their remarks were to which they responded, of course, “oh no, I didn’t mean it *that way*.” Yeah right.

I like to think of myself as a pretty strong person, especially when it comes to my activism. But this time, I had to rush myself out of the meeting so they wouldn’t see tears in my eyes which burst out as soon as I left the room. The whole meeting was bizarre and I could not take it any longer. I even got on a wrong bus and didn’t notice for twenty minutes that day because I was so frustrated. I felt betrayed by the very people whom I thought were my allies. Worst of all, Women’s Union is being used by the administration to silence women and they don’t even realize it.

Over the weekend, I called all of my friends to see who could help me put together some kind of protest. I did not have the time nor the energy it takes to organize a rally in just a couple of days, but I did make a handout to be distributed on the day of the display. My handout was designed to point out hypocrisy of the visiting anti choice group while giving students a set of suggestions: don’t engage with the anti choice group, because it’s no use; take care of yourself don’t let them make you feel guilty for exercising your constitutional rights; support your friends if they are having a difficult time; and join the Feminist Conspiracy and do something positive.

I woke up early on the day of the display, and watched as the anti choice group set up their stuff. When they got ready, my friends and I started giving out the handouts. I targeted women especially those who seem to be upset from seeing the display. “Are you okay? Do you need to talk?” I said to many women throughout the day, giving peer support to a dozen of them and validating their pain and anger while distributing copies of the handout.

People from Women’s Union as well as other student leaders were there too, but they were wearing those ridiculous “Neutral Observer” signs to show that they are not taking sides. They walked around all day asking people to respect freedom of speech and to support responsibility in free speech. It seemed strange to me that they only ask people to respect “freedom” for the anti choice group while demanding “responsibility” from women who refuse to give up their constitutional rights. There were no riots, only a bizarre circus.

And I knew in my heart that no matter what the leaders of the Women’s Union would think, my friends and I were the only sane presence on the day of the display.

We will not be silenced, even when Women's Union is co opted by the administration into silencing us.

Emi Koyama is a third wavin' activist/academic, synthesizing her feminist, Asian, survivor, dyke, queer, sex worker, slut, intersex, genderqueer, and crip politics, as these factors, while not a complete descriptor of who she is, all impacted her life. Emi lives in Portland, Oregon, where she is putting the Emi back in feminism through **Eminism.org** and a variety of online and offline propaganda. Email Emi at **emi@eminism.org**. This article has been proudly rejected by *Ms.* magazine.